

The Representation of Teenage Girls in 1980s Japanese Media: A Case Study of *The Island
Closest to Heaven* (1984) by Obayashi Nobuhiko

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See this river? If you follow it all the way out, it leads you to the sea. If you keep going, way to the south, all the way to the other side of the world. There's a small island made of pure white coral. That's the island closest to where God is in heaven. This is the story that the father of Mari Katsuragi, a young Japanese girl, tells her in the opening scene of *The Island Closest to Heaven* (1984). A story centered on self-discovery and the passing of a parent. The journey of this film is not only about physical exploration but one of emotional healing and closure. In this essay, I argue that the representation of teenage girls in media during 1980s Japan was empowering, exemplified by Obayashi Nobuhiko's film, *The Island Closest to Heaven*. With a closer look at Japan's feminist movements, its socio-cultural landscape, and economic bubbles and through an analysis of the film's narrative, visual aesthetics, and thematic elements, I demonstrate how this film portrays teenage girls as individuals with agency, challenges traditional gender norms, and captures the complexities of adolescence.

An overview of the history of Japanese women's feminist movements, cultural and societal norms, and economic booms is necessary to understand the nuance in the representation of teenage girls in 80s Japanese cinema. The New Women's Organization emerged in 1919, half a century after the Meiji Restoration in 1868¹. This marked the first notable feminist movement in Japan. Their primary focus was on the women's social and political emancipation, advocating for gender equality, and challenging traditional gender roles². Despite their efforts, the New Women's Organization was largely unsuccessful in achieving its objectives due to various societal factors and resistance from conservative forces³. Women had to stay in the house and

¹ 1. Polina Lukyantseva, "Feminism in Modern Japan: A Historical Review of Japanese Women's Issue on Gender," *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 8, 25, no. 2 (March 2023): 3.

² Lukyantseva, "Feminism in Modern Japan," 3.

³ *Ibid.*, 3.

were required to follow ideologies such as *Ryosaikenbo*⁴. However, their activities laid the groundwork for future feminist movements in Japan.

The Women's Liberation Movement surfaced in the 1960s⁵—inspired by global feminist movements and social unrest during that era. This movement sought out to challenge the traditional gender roles and patriarchal structures deeply ingrained in Japanese society. Women activists demanded greater autonomy, reproductive rights, economic equality, and an end to discrimination in both public and private spheres⁶. The Women's Liberation Movement had a significant impact on shaping modern femininity in Japan. It brought attention to issues such as gender inequality, domestic violence, and workplace discrimination. This movement also influenced the representation of women within Japanese society.

As mentioned, *Ryosaikenbo* can be translated into English as “good wife and wise mother.”⁷ This post-war ideology was dictated by the obligation for women to provide a healthy home environment to raise children while the men worked to support the country.⁸ This concept was transformed in the 60s to 70s into *Sengyo-shufu* (full-time housewife). However, both remain dominant in Japanese society today and are deeply ingrained as the traditional image of a decent Japanese woman.⁹ Throughout the 50s to 70s, their society constantly reinforced these gender roles, in which women's essential tasks consisted of educating and raising children while also caring for their husbands and household. The word femininity itself is associated with the term: caregiver.¹⁰ Because of this, many young women struggled to form their sense of identity apart from the gender role of being a mother or a wife. Throughout these Japanese women's

⁴ Ibid., 3.

⁵ Lukyantseva, “Feminism in Modern Japan,” 4.

⁶ Ibid., 4.

⁷ Lukyantseva, “Feminism in Modern Japan,” 3.

⁸ Lukyantseva, “Feminism in Modern Japan,” 9.

⁹ Ibid., 9.

¹⁰ Ibid., 9.

lives, there are three ways that these women submit to male authority.¹¹ As a young child, she is to submit to her father. As a wife, she submits to her husband. And as an elderly lady or widowed, she is to submit to her sons. In every stage of life, Japanese society enforces gender roles onto women that do not want them to be dominant nor have their own sense of identity.

Throughout the 20th century, Japan experienced several economic booms that transformed the country's socio-cultural landscape– the post-World War II period witnessed remarkable economic growth, commonly referred to as the “Japanese economic bubble.”¹² Japan rapidly transformed into a post-industrial society organized around information and consumption.¹³ The economic boom profoundly impacted Japan's social and cultural aspects. With increased wealth and access to consumer goods, Japanese society underwent a shift towards a more consumerist mindset.¹⁴ The rise of consumerism challenged traditional gender roles and ideology. The traditional ideologies of *Ryosaikenbo* and *Sengyo-shufu* were increasingly undermined. As consumerism grew, women found empowerment through their participation in purchasing and consumption decision-making.¹⁵ They became active agents in shaping their lifestyles and expressing their individuality through consumer choices.

Furthermore, the booming economy led to an increase in women's workforce participation.¹⁶ This shift marked a significant departure from the traditional view that women's primary role was limited to the domestic sphere. Additionally, young women in Japan began seeking higher education during this period. The percentage of girls attending high school

¹¹ Chris Kincaid, “Gender Roles of Women in Modern Japan,” Japan Powered, June 2, 2019, <https://www.japanpowered.com/japan-culture/gender-roles-women-modern-japan>.

¹² Nathan Mahr, “Japanese Bubble Economy | Overview, Causes & Effects,” Study.com | Take Online Courses. Earn College Credit. Research Schools, Degrees & Careers, December 30, 2022, <https://study.com/academy/lesson/japanese-bubble-economy-overview-causes-effects.html>.

¹³ Patrick W Galbraith and Jason G Karlin, *Idols and Celebrity in Japanese Media Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 5.

¹⁴ Satsuki Kawano, Glenda Susan Roberts, and Susan Orpett Long, “Working Women of the Bubble Generation,” essay, in *Capturing Contemporary Japan: Differentiation and Uncertainty* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014), 83–103, 84.

¹⁵ Barbara H Sato, *The New Japanese Woman: Modernity, Media, and Women in Interwar Japan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 16.

¹⁶ Kawano, et al., “Working Women of the Bubble Generation, 85.

increased from 3% in the 1960s to 11% in the 70s.¹⁷ Education became a pathway for women to pursue careers and assert their independence. The economic booms of the 20th century in Japan and the increase in education played a vital role in shaping the empowerment and aspirations of women. Nevertheless, despite their contributions, gender inequality persisted in many aspects of Japanese society. Women faced challenges such as wage gaps, limited career advancement opportunities, and societal expectations that continued to prioritize their roles as wives and mothers¹⁸.

While this all occurred, Japanese media was introduced to a new linguistic concept that became widespread. *Judai* or teenager refers to “the transitional stage of physical and mental human development that occurs between childhood and adulthood, often extending into a person’s early 20s.”¹⁹ This term derived from the United States’ meanings that originated in the 1920s and 40s.²⁰ According to *The Formation of Youth as a Social Category in Pre-1970s Japan*, people within this age bracket were not recognized as independent people as there had not been a period of youth prior to their defeat in the war.²¹ This independent generation became an issue for society because the media transformed the idea of youth into a metaphor for social change.²² The idea of a teenager also became a problem for *shojo* (girl) because it was an inbetween of girlhood and motherhood.²³ This opened up opportunities for girls to be outside the realms of submission to their fathers and husbands.

Consequently, the youth became a theme in Japanese cinema.²⁴ Pursuing personal autonomy emerged as a central theme, manifesting either through organized political activism or

¹⁷ Lukyantseva, “Feminism in Modern Japan,” 9.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁹ 1. Michal Dalit-Bul, “The Formation of ‘youth’ as a Social Category in Pre-1970s Japan: A Forgotten Chapter of Japanese Postwar Youth Countercultures,” *Social Science Japan Journal* 17, no. 1 (2013): 41–58, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ssjj/jyt025>, 45.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 46.

²² *Ibid.*, 46.

²³ Chris Kincaid, “Gender Roles of Women in Modern Japan,” Japan Powered, June 2, 2019, <https://www.japanpowered.com/japan-culture/gender-roles-women-modern-japan>.

²⁴ Dalit-Bul, “The Formation of Youth,” 44.

an individualistic rejection of authority.²⁵ Although, much of these narratives were male-centered as they became the voice of the teenagers.²⁶ Young women were often portrayed in passive and submissive roles, reflecting their societal position outside the teenage culture. Female characters were typically depicted as adhering to traditional femininity, embodying dependent, emotional, romantic, cute, tender, warm, dedicated, submissive, cheerful, and peaceful traits.²⁷ Any young female characters that were depicted as active, intelligent, courageous, or able to think, plan, and control were rarely shown.²⁸ These representations of teenage girls were seen as proper girls. They exemplify the idealized Japanese girl, conforming to societal expectations of femininity and reinforcing traditional gender roles.

The representation of teenage girls in the 1980s cinema reflects much of these historical and societal contexts. The 80s marked a period of cultural and artistic exploration but is often referred to as the country's "Lost Decade of Cinema" because of a perceived lack of quality productions.²⁹ This was caused by the decline of Japan's traditional studio system at the end of the 70s.³⁰ However, the films released during this time addressed societal issues and challenged traditional norms, including gender roles. Teenage girls became an important subject during this time period. Films like *Sailor Suit and Machine Gun* (1981) and *The Girl Who Leapt Through Time* (1983) depicted young girls navigating their identities through a rapidly changing society. These films often portrayed teenage girls as rebellious, seeking personal freedom, and challenging societal expectations.

²⁵ Ibid., 44.

²⁶ Ibid., 46.

²⁷ Shinichi Saito, "Television and the Cultivation of Gender-Role Attitudes in Japan: Does Television Contribute to the Maintenance of the Status Quo?," *Journal of Communication* 57, no. 3 (2007): 511–31, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2007.00355.x>, 515.

²⁸ Saito, "Cultivation of Gender-Role," 515.

²⁹ James Balmont, "5 Underrated Films from Japan's Lost Decade of Cinema," Arrow Films, October 21, 2022, <https://www.arrowfilms.com/blog/features/5-underrated-films-from-japans-lost-decade-of-cinema/>.

³⁰ Inuhiko, "9. Decline and Torpor: 1971–1980," *What Is Japanese Cinema?*, 2019, 148–62, <https://doi.org/10.7312/yomo19162-012>, 148.

The representations of teenage girls in these films symbolize the broader social and cultural shifts in Japan at the time. They reflected a desire for individualism, autonomy, and breaking traditional gender molds. These themes were influenced by the feminist movements of the past and the changing social landscape. These films provided a platform for exploring and questioning societal norms and expectations by depicting teenage girls as agents of change. They challenged the traditional portrayals of young women as passive and submissive, offering a more nuanced and empowered representation.

This empowerment portrayal of teenage girls can be seen in *The Island Closest To Heaven*, directed by Nobuhiko Obayashi, through the film's narrative, visual aesthetics, and thematic elements. The film is a tale of love, childhood, and coming-of-age. The plot begins with Mari and her father sitting on the ledge of a bridge as he tells the tales of an island called New Caledonia, a place on the other side of the world in which is made of pure white coral and fluffy flower blossoms and where God meets with those who ask for him. As a little girl, she promised her father they would visit the island one day. Unfortunately, her father passed away when she was sixteen before they could do so. Mari decides to go to the island alone, hoping to find the island closest to heaven.

The film's plot portrays Mari as a young woman with agency and empowerment. Despite the challenges and uncertainties, the decision to travel to New Caledonia alone demonstrates her determination to fulfill her childhood promises and find the island. Mari's solo journey showcases her independence and resilience. By venturing to a foreign country on her own, she takes control of her own destiny and demonstrates her ability to navigate unfamiliar environments. This decision reflects her courage and highlights her desire for self-discovery and personal growth. Throughout the film, Mari encounters various obstacles and challenges, both

external and internal. She hops from island to island, hoping that she will *feel* the right one. After failed attempts, she continues searching, displaying her inner strength and determination. By taking charge of her own narrative, Mari demonstrates that she is not defined by her circumstances or the loss of her father. Instead, she shapes her path and seeks fulfillment on her terms. The film's narrative structure emphasizes Mari's agency by focusing on her personal journey and experiences. The audience witnesses her transformation and growth as she explores the neighboring islands and meets the island folk.

Mari's character challenges traditional Japanese gender norms and portrays a young woman who defies societal expectations. Her personality and actions showcase her independence, courage, and intelligence, qualities not commonly portrayed in young women in Japanese media during the film's shooting. Mari's physical activities, such as riding a bike up a giant hill and hiking up a tall mountain, demonstrate her strength and independence. These scenes highlight her active nature, challenging the notion that young women should be delicate or passive. Her willingness to engage in physically demanding activities on her own terms showcases her autonomy and the agency she possesses and defies cultural gender norms. Her decision to travel to a foreign country alone further emphasizes her independence and defiance of traditional gender roles. By taking control of her journey and experiencing new cultures and people, Mari showcases her ability to navigate unfamiliar territories and make decisions for herself. Her defiance of authority and willingness to challenge societal norms is evidenced in her interactions with the group tour guide. She strays away from the planned activities, demonstrating her desire for personal exploration and refusing to conform to the expectations set by others. Her decision to go with Yuichi Fakaya, despite warnings from the group leader, underscores her rebellious nature and her refusal to be controlled or restricted.

Additionally, Mari's emotional resilience is notable throughout the film. She does not easily succumb to tears or emotional outbursts, challenging the stereotype of women as overly emotional. Her ability to remain composed and handle situations with a level-headed approach showcases her strength and self-possession. The trait is established in her character at an early age. In the opening scene, her sandal falls into the water, and she says, "Don't worry, father. I will not cry." The audience also never sees her mourn or cry for her father, even as she deals with grief, until the film's end. However, she does not cry out of sadness but of joy. The joy and relief in realizing that her father is with her at that moment, listening to the picture show. She sheds a tear because of the closure she receives in knowing that she has found the island her father spoke about and fulfilled her promise. The relief in knowing that he is there with her. This final scene is a powerful moment of closure and emotional release. It demonstrates that despite her strong and independent demeanor, she carries a deep connection and love for her father. The tears symbolize joy, relief, and emotional catharsis, representing the fulfillment of her promise and her unity with her father.

Lastly, her ability to find an identity and purpose outside of being a mother or wife, challenges the prevalent belief that a woman's primary role is within the domestic sphere. Mari's character defies these expectations. As an unmarried woman who has lost her father, she does not conform to the conventional path of settling down and starting a family. She seeks fulfillment and self-discovery outside of societal expectations, not conforming to the predetermined roles that society had assigned to women. By showcasing her ability to find an identity outside of traditional gender roles, the film promotes the idea that women can define their identities and pursue aspirations independently.

Obayashi's visual style in *The Island Closest to Heaven* can be characterized by its vibrant and imaginative aesthetics, which play a significant role in capturing the complexities of adolescence and reflecting Mari's desires, experiences, and self-discovery. The film's use of desaturated hues and pastel colors contributes to a nostalgic atmosphere, evoking a sense of reminiscence and longing. These visual choices enhance the audience's emotional connection to Mari's journey and evoke a feeling of wistfulness associated with childhood and growing up.

Obayashi's editing techniques, such as jump cuts and fade transitions, add energy to the narrative and create a visually captivating experience. The jump cuts, like the one where Mari falls over the coconuts when first meeting Taro, inject a sense of playfulness and energy into the storytelling, reflecting the unpredictability and spontaneity of youth. The fade transitions, such as the crossfade from Mari's face to a wide shot of the boat alone in the ocean, create a dreamlike quality and emphasize the emotional weight of certain moments in the film. Especially like the one in that scene in which the audience listens to Miss Ishikawa reconcile and gain closure with the loss of her husband.

Stylized cinematography is another aspect of Obayashi's visual style. By employing techniques that immerse the audience in the protagonist's experiences, such as the shot of Mari on the boat where the audience can feel the waves, he creates a sensory and immersive viewing experience. This approach allows the audience to feel more connected to her journey and enhances the understanding of her perspective as a young woman seeking self-discovery. Nobuhiko Obayashi contributes to the representation of Japanese youth by capturing their spirit, energy, and their individuality as a teenage girl. The coloring, innovative editing techniques, and stylized cinematography work together to create an emotional portrayal of Mari's coming-of-age journey.

This film delves into various themes, including grief and loss, memory and nostalgia, and gender and identity. These themes are intricately woven throughout the film, providing a deeper exploration of the coming-of-age experiences and challenges faced by the characters. Grief and loss are central themes in the film as Mari grapples with her father's death. Through her journey to New Caledonia and her search for the island closest to heaven, she confronts her grief and finds closure. The film explores the ways in which memories and promises can both comfort and haunt us, reflecting on the impact of loss on personal growth and self-discovery. Memory and nostalgia play a significant role in Mari's character development. Obayashi portrays her revisiting old promises and stories, delving into her memories of her father and childhood. The film examines the nature of nostalgia, highlighting its bittersweet essence and the profound effect it has on shaping identity and understanding of the past. The exploration of gender roles and societal expectations is another theme that he tackles in the film. By challenging traditional notions of femininity, he presents complex characters like Mari, who defy societal norms. Mari's portrayal as a young woman with agency, empowerment, and a desire for self-discovery challenges the limited roles often assigned to young Japanese women.

Symbolism and allegory are employed to explore deeper themes and emotions. The island serves as a symbol of Mari's transition into adulthood and her pursuit of personal fulfillment. Her father's story is an allegory for her enduring connection, represented by moments of love and happiness that she will experience throughout her life. By interweaving these themes, the film presents a nuanced portrayal of youth and the journey of self-discovery. The audience can reflect on their own experiences, memories, and societal expectations while emphasizing the empowerment and agency found in embracing one's true identity.

The representation of teenage girls in 1980s Japanese cinema serves as a reflection of the evolving social and cultural dynamics in Japan. As seen in Nobuhiko Obayashi's film *The Island Closest to Heaven*, young women are empowered with individuality and agency, as seen through the film's narrative, visual aesthetics, and themes. This film and many others of the 1980s provided a reflection of societal changes, the influence of feminist movements, and the aspirations of young women seeking autonomy. While progress is notable, the persisting gender inequalities underscored the need for continued efforts toward achieving gender equality in Japanese society. By recognizing the significance of these cinematic representations, one can gain insight into the complex journey of teenage girls and the broader evolution of gender dynamics in Japan.

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